

Behavioural Digest

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The Devil Is In The Default By Garry Sanderson

Yesterday I finally was organised enough to review my pension arrangements with my financial advisor. On reviewing the various schemes that I have found myself part of, she noted that all of the investments were in the 'default' funds selected by each provider. This is perhaps OK, but perhaps not. The key point is that at no time have I made any conscious decision regarding fund allocation. I suspect I am not the only one to behave in this way...

The default option is the one that you in effect choose if you do nothing. And, of course, doing nothing is the easiest thing for us to do, hence the power of the default effect. This is perhaps the behavioural parallel to Newton's first law of motion - a body will remain at rest, or uniform motion in a straight line unless acted upon by an external force.

In our increasingly busy lives, we are more at risk of default behaviour that is not in our best interests - think about the bank account that you have held for many years that you know is not a good deal. Our challenge is to see what we do not usually see, to identify and challenge default patterns in our behaviour and choices. Right, time for my mid-afternoon coffee...

Feedback vs. Extinction By Lynn Dunlop

Feedback delivered by a leader in the workplace can be an attempt to reinforce something they like, or to let someone know that there is something they could work on to improve. There is another use for this excellent tool: Delivering feedback as a way to purposefully avoid delivering unintended Extinction.

We all expect some kind of reinforcement for our efforts, and sometimes that reinforcer doesn't arrive. In behavioural science, the term for this frustrating process is Extinction. For example, if you work really hard on a report and your boss doesn't even notice, your behaviour of working hard on reports has been subject to extinction. Or if you send an email to a colleague asking for something and you get no response at all? Extinction. Without a concerted effort, it is easy for the victim of extinction to simply say nothing when they experience the frustration of 'no response', and that can quickly become a cultural norm. Once that has happened, it's very difficult to then start saying something without risking a breach of the now-accepted etiquette.

Using feedback is a way for leaders to be sure that they're not inadvertently putting behaviours on extinction. By simply noting aloud what you see people saying and doing, you are acknowledging their efforts. This kind of feedback doesn't need to be 'praise' or 'criticism', it just needs leaders to 'say what they see'. Where a cultural norm is to frequently deliver feedback, extinction simply disappears.



[Click here](#) to join the BMT group on LinkedIn.

Still Struggling Over Toys

By Bruce Faulkner

Researchers observe groups of preschool children to learn how they socialise. One such project studied four-year-olds struggling over access to toys, and assigned them a place in a hierarchy. One child won the most struggles and gained rank because of that. Lower-ranking children focused attention on higher-ranking children. They spent much more time glancing at high-ranking children than at each other. They didn't look around to figure out who they could displace at the toy shelf. High ranking children started and organised more games and broke up disputes.

Adults differ from children so extending these findings is silly. Watching adults at flip charts has echoes of the toy shelf. There is an initial struggle, after which a hierarchy emerges. Everyone senses their place and role. Similar struggles occur in meetings. Over time dissent gets tamped down and concerns dismissed. Corners get rounded off. When a crisis emerges, people defer to the dominant person for solutions.

In complex environments, no one person has the answer, so reverting to the nursery hierarchy is counter-productive. To understand how a system interacts requires diverse viewpoints. Groups that cooperate out-think and outperform individual opinions. A team dominated by an individual won't solve their own problems. Their focus is upward; they wait to be told what to do. This creates a dominant-passive pattern.

This pattern shows up in our climate surveys. Leadership groups point to problems of competence. Staff say their decisions are being overturned. This means leaders are doing their staff's jobs. This is seen when observing behaviours in meetings and emails, it reveals adults struggling over toys. The too busy boss rarely spends time with their underlings so every few months the team decamps off back to the playroom for a rematch (away day).

Knee Jerk Reactions

By Howard Lees

There is a tendency amongst some leaders to 'knee jerk' when safety incidents occur. There are numerous companies out there that have hamstrung their workers, post-incident, by making them wear or use difficult or inappropriate tools or clothing, causing much punishment to the very people that worked safely for many years.

Once a company decides to roll out an edict that from now on everyone has to, for example, 'wear motorcycle helmets', that is very difficult to walk back from. Blame cultures have a lot to answer for!

Focused Brain Power And Welcome Distractions

By Walter Huffnagel

The typical day of the typical knowledge worker is a combination of moments of focused brain power and other time spent on welcome distractions. The body of research agrees that a typical knowledge worker can successfully carry out about 3hrs per day of fully focused work. After this, their effectiveness dramatically reduces.

Perhaps there is an analogy here to view a day's work like a cyclist would view a mountain stage of a grand tour. They know how much time it's going to take; they know how much cumulative power they can produce in a day's race; they know they must fill the day with effort wisely balanced out over the whole length of the race; they know to be aware of what everyone else in their team are doing.

Work dumped on us by others creates detours to our course, adding distance, consuming power. Glance at your diary/schedule and ask yourself, "Is this an even balance of activity during the day? Am I happy that all these activities are going to be useful to me and my team? Have I made enough time for the predictable detours?"

Shades of BMT

- Do you get emails you don't want? If so, how will you stop getting them in the future?
- New Year's resolutions work just like any resolutions; if you can't find a way of changing your environment, nothing is likely to change.
- We are perfectly designed to get what we get right now, down to the last millimetre, penny and compliment.
- Teaching is a lottery - it totally depends on what end of the scale you get to teach. You will find yourself babysitting the distracted or inspiring the enthusiasts or all points in between.